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## **Illegal immigration, the real story: Obama administration aggressively enforces existing laws**

**By Froma Harrop**

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While backers of the Arizona law charge President Obama with pandering to Latino voters, writes Froma Harrop, his administration is doing what these hard-liners say they want: It is enforcing the immigration laws already on the books — and with considerable results.

Arizona commands front and center stage in the national drama over illegal immigration. But the real action lies elsewhere. For those who prefer dealing with the problem in a more humane way, the news out of backstage is encouraging.

By challenging Arizona's tough new immigration law, the Obama administration stands accused of frustrating a public angry at the cost and crime associated with illegal immigration. Last week, a federal district judge seemed to support the administration's position when she blocked controversial parts of the law.

All this obscures a curious political reality. While backers of the Arizona law charge President Obama with pandering to Latino voters, his administration is doing what they say they want: It is enforcing the immigration laws already on the books — and with considerable results.

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency expects to deport 400,000 illegal immigrants this fiscal year, a record number. The administration has been aggressively checking the records of companies suspected of hiring undocumented workers and imposing stiff fines on the offenders. The number of these audits has quadrupled since the last year of the George W. Bush administration.

In truth, illegal immigration was on the decline even before the change of administration. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of illegal aliens fell by 1 million(!), according to a recent Department of Homeland Security report. The weak economy no doubt also plays a part, as fewer illegal aliens arrive and some leave.

Politically, Obama is handling this explosive issue with skill, and his mostly Republican opposition is not. Latinos represent a fast-growing and powerful voting bloc.

Of course, many Hispanics also want illegal immigration stopped but don't favor policies that would single them out. So how are they to regard the Arizona provision that would let police check the immigration status of anyone they stop for another alleged misdeed and suspect of being here illegally? Or that requires foreigners to carry papers showing their right to be in the country?

Appointed by Bill Clinton, Judge Susan Bolton has a history of clear-eyed thinking on immigration. On the Arizona law, she correctly observed that "by enforcing this statute, Arizona would impose a 'distinct, unusual and extraordinary burden' on legal residents that only the federal government has the authority to impose."

But Bolton also left alone the part that undermines "sanctuary city" policies, whereby local authorities refuse to help the feds enforce immigration law. This setback for the "sanctuary city" movement surely displeases some Hispanic activists.

The advocates also can't be happy about the workplace audits, which are forcing employers to let go of their illegal workers. Nor can they be content with immigration-reform proposals, backed by the administration, that require a secure ID for all job-seekers.

At the same time, Obama has de-emphasized the workplace raids that ended in poor foreigners being led away in chains and families broken up. And by suing Arizona, his Justice Department is discouraging other states from taking similar ham-fisted measures that turn foreign-looking people into suspects.

Bush was a fan of the cheap labor that illegal immigration fostered, but he did have an abiding respect for the aliens themselves. In pushing his own comprehensive immigration reforms, he warned against "harsh, ugly rhetoric."

But now that rhetoric has busted through the gates, and responsible Republican leaders will have a hard time corralling it. This obviously isn't helpful to their party's long-term prospects.

In the meantime, the Obama administration is quietly making strides against illegal immigration. If the president can use this progress to convince skeptics of comprehensive reform that any amnesty will be the last, he will have really accomplished something.